



## SUDHIR BHATTACHARYA (1915-1990) ON TELANGANA REVOLUTION (1969)

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If the historiography of Communism in India is in itself an underdeveloped sub-discipline, then the phase of Naxalite politics and thought within the history of Communism has received even lesser attention. There are many descriptions of the Naxalbari movement but not much on the intricate intellectuality of many of its partisans. In this article we provide some material for political theorists, sociologists, intellectual historians to analyse this Naxalite intellectuality. A schoolmaster called Sudhir Bhattacharya (1915-1990) lived in Calcutta and wrote on historical and political issues from his own Naxalite partisan location. His evaluation of a preceding episode of peasant insurgency in twentieth century India demands patient reading.

We begin with his account of Telangana Revolution – he used the pseudonym Kafi Khan here. He wrote the history of the insurrection in Telangana of 1940s and 1950s in his book *Telangana Biplab* (The Telangana Revolution). Originally written and published in 1969, the edition that survived was a 1989 reprint with minor modifications made by the author himself. He began thus: "Telangana is the event in the entire history of this land, a name that shall remain alive forever." In 1947, when the big factory-owners and feudal landlords had just comfortably settled in the throne of Delhi inherited from the British imperialists, at that very juncture the peasants of Telangana, led by revolutionary Communists, rose up to destroy the central pillar of feudalism – they started the first armed anti-imperialist, anti-bourgeois and anti-feudal revolution in the colonial-national territory of the Indian state. Alarmed and frightened, the ruling elite led by Nehru and Patel sent its armed forces to crush the revolutionary peasantry. But Telangana did not die, the struggle did not end. The resilience of the awakened revolutionary spirit of the peasantry and the working class was evident. Disturbingly enough, the struggle was temporarily suspended due to the 'conspiracy of the fifth column – the treachery of the central Communist leadership'. Yet, it did not end; it was a brief hiatus. Telangana for Khan was politics proclaimed. "Telangana is perhaps faint in the youth's political memory, but the idea of Telangana survives in the consciousness of the toiling mass tormented for centuries by imperialism, monopolists and landlords. The insurrections of today rearing head in different regions carry the spirit of Telangana."

This was a significant claim, especially in the context that Khan described: in the late sixties CPI and CPI (M), using their organs like "Deshahitaishi", "Ganashakti" and "Kalantar", were trying to establish that the Telangana struggle was based on an economic demand, and was not a political or revolutionary movement. Khan presented a detailed account of the movement – based on newspaper and journal reports that came out during or after the Telangana insurrection – to firmly place Telangana in the order of high revolutionary politics. Khan enquired: "Telangana raises a number of extremely critical questions for the Communist Party and the revolutionary people: whether the path of Chinese Revolution and Mao Tse Tung or the compromising path of the central leadership of the Communists here? Whether the path of Telangana or that of bourgeois elections? Whether the path of revolution or one of acquiring the lawmaking capacity of the big bourgeoisie and landlords? Which path will lead to the emancipation of the exploited working class and peasantry, to people's democracy, and to socialism?" It was hardly ironic for Khan that when the combined armed forces of the Nizam and Nehru-Patel failed to subjugate revolutionary Telangana entirely, it was backstabbed by the central leadership of the Communist Party; with the first general election to the Indian parliament impending, in November 1951, the central leadership of the Communist Party called for a return to 'normalcy' within the country, and the struggle was suspended. This was a significant claim, especially in the context that Khan described: in the late sixties CPI and CPI (M), using their organs like "Deshahitaishi", "Ganashakti" and "Kalantar", were trying to establish that the Telangana struggle was based on an economic demand, and was not a political or revolutionary movement. Khan presented a detailed account of the movement – based on newspaper and journal reports that came out during or after the Telangana insurrection – to firmly place Telangana in the order of high revolutionary politics. Khan enquired: "Telangana raises a number of extremely critical questions for the Communist Party and the revolutionary people: whether the path of Chinese Revolution and Mao Tse Tung or the compromising path of the central leadership of the Communists here? Whether the path of Telangana or

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This was after more than 4000 ordinary Communist partisans, agricultural workers and women were killed by the combined forces of Nizam and Indian state. Khan described that by 1948, in a sixth of the whole Hyderabad state, or in 3/4<sup>th</sup> of Telangana region – in 2,500 villages – Nizam's rule ceased to exist. This vast region was a people's democratic state. All land belonging to the landlords was confiscated. This land, amounting to 36,00,000 *bigha*, was distributed amongst the agricultural labourers, poor and middle peasants. Through autonomous *panchayats* or village councils people exercised the power of lawmaking and justice. This liberated zone had more than five million people. The people's government made primary education mandatory for all girls and boys of peasant origin. There were schools where peasant revolutionaries learnt more about revolutionary theory and philosophy. There was a large peasant-army led by several squads. When there was peace these soldiers ploughed their land, when there was war they fought against the army of the Nizam and the Indian state. Khan found revolutionary accord between making revolution and building socialism, not in a neat resolution, but as a radical inconsistency. It was not a mere call for abolition of landlordism or redistribution of land, it was a battle to eradicate all signs of feudal and statist exploitation from the face of Telangana. It was a concrete move towards a peasant-worker's soviet state supporting democratic cultural-linguistic assertions rejecting the colonial centralizing imperative of Indian state and nationalism. It was also an attack on British and U.S. imperialism which aligned explicitly in favour of the Nizam. Khan patiently depicted the history of feudal and colonial exploitation in Telangana, including a precise picture of extra-economic coercion, illegal exactions, damnation and poverty. Goon squads of the Nizam hoisted an additional layer of corruption, physical abuse and robbery. A handful of the Nizam's feudatories and collectors-landholders were flourishing: for example, 10 such families had a yearly income of Rs. 100 million, whereas the peasants were burdened by a debt-pool of Rs. 800 million, the high interest rates from which nourished the ruling elite further. Against this, the peasant discontent and movement was progressively radicalised from the relatively docile era of (the rich peasantry and local businessmen-led) State Congress to the newly formed Communist Party-led Andhra Mahasabha. During 1944-1946, with local Communist members anchoring the movement, the conflict between the peasants and the colonial state sharpened; insurrectionary power was unleashed by the peasants against the rampaging goon squads of the Nizam independently in different pockets. Small volunteer squads were formed to avoid frontal battles and implement guerrilla tactics: it was the "declaration of People's War", in Khan's words.

The local Communist leadership, was however, misguided by the reformist leadership of P.C. Joshi. He urged the local Communist leadership to rein in the violent excess and the overtly revolutionary programme of the democratic war, and limit the demands strictly to the abolition of illegal exaction and unpaid labour. When the partisans demanded arms from the Party, Joshi's command procured none. With the depredations of reactionary forces increasing, the local leadership started defying the order of the central leadership. Snatching and distribution of arms began. Khan located the 'revolutionary transformation of the struggle' of Telangana in moments within the Communist Party, and not exclusively in the economy, sociology and geography of Telangana. Locally feudal atrocity was rampant. Nehru-Patel's Indian state – realising that Telangana could trigger similar uprisings up south and down north – sent in its army too. At this juncture, in December 1947, there was a meeting of the central committee of the Communist Party, where Joshi's role was severely condemned and the Communist partisans in Hyderabad were urged to support the armed struggle of

the peasants, occupy land and redistribute it among the poor peasants and the landless agricultural labourers. In February 1948, the Party Congress in Calcutta reiterated this stand. Emboldened, the local Communists now advanced with a number of revolutionary programmes carried out through protracted warfare and intensely democratic forms of building socialism from below. Khan enlisted a number of events of revolutionary violence and organisation, describes the universal aspect of the revolutionary moment of Telangana with evidences – students ready to declass and join the struggle and the effortless bravery of women guerrilla comrades. That Khan was no promoter of undifferentiated peasant essentialism was reinforced by his affirmation of the role of the working class during the Telangana Revolution. By November-December 1946, the working class in different urban centres, factories and mines of Hyderabad began to show solidarity with the peasants of Telangana. They carried out meetings and processions in support of Telangana; they sent propaganda squads in rural areas. In the industrial areas, the Nizam's army camped and started persecuting the workers which only invigorated their culture of protest further: 15,000 textile workers from Warangal, Hyderabad, Nanded, Aurangabad and Gulbarga called a strike which lasted two months. The miners of Kothagudem called five strikes to condemn the arrest of their leaders and in support of the agrarian revolution. When in 1948 their leader Seshagiri Rao was arrested and shot dead, the miners called a strike and declared revolt. They killed a number of police personnel in retaliation. Hindu-Muslim solidarity amongst the workers was shaped by the lesson of Telangana, and they worked in complete unity against the Nizam's regime. Nizam's government tried to create a rift between Hindu and Muslim workers but failed. First P.C. Joshi tried to stifle local Communists, and then B.T. Ranadive's line of the so-called 'socialist revolution' stopped the local Communists of Hyderabad from supporting the armed struggle of peasants. But the railway and textile workers in the city compiled such pressure and criticism that the city committee had to change its stand. In 1950, when the peasant prisoners were sentenced to death by the Hyderabad High Court the working class of Hyderabad rose up. 80,000 factory workers paralysed manufacturing and transport in the city by calling a number of strikes. The Nizam regime subsequently had to revoke the punishment. The workers also joined the peasant struggle as volunteers. "There is no other instance in this country's history that matches up to this revolutionary solidarity."

Khan emphasised that Telangana came under the attack of apparently contrasting hues of the central leadership of the Communist Party. Reformist P.C. Joshi harnessed the struggle till 1948, and from 1948 B.T. Ranadive (B.T.R) – the harbinger of the socialist revolutionary line – undermined it. Khan described Ranadive's position in some detail: B.T.R declared that in India feudal exploitation and imperialism had almost entirely ceased to exist, and capitalist industry had developed adequately. The bourgeoisie was ruling and exploiting the working class independently. There was no distinction between a national/regional bourgeoisie and big monopoly bourgeoisie in India. Hence the aim was not an anti-feudal and anti-imperialist revolution, but a socialist revolution snatching power from the hands of bourgeoisie and establishing a socialist state of the working class. Just as the factory-owners and bourgeoisie controlled the urban areas, the rich capitalist farmers dominated in the rural areas. Most peasants were agricultural labourers, and hence a working class revolution was to eradicate the hegemony of bourgeoisie in the cities and that of the capitalist farmers in the villages. Poor peasants and agricultural labourers were to provide support to the working class. Revolution in India was going to be an exact copy of the November revolution in Russia, which according to Ranadive was a socialist revolution conducted by the working class. In one of his articles Ranadive attacked Mao Tse-tung. He asserted that the CPI considered Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin as sources of Marxism; apart from them it did not acknowledge any other valid source. The 'so-called new democracy', an invention of Mao Tse-tung – 'peddled' by some as expansion of Marxism – had not been accepted by any Communist Party of the world, Ranadive persuaded. Ranadive deemed the peasantry as reactionary, dubbed Mao Tse-tung a poor Marxist and the support for Telangana Revolution as right-wing deviation (due to alliance with rural intermediary classes). He argued that Mao Tse-tung's theories were unacceptable for Communist Parties. His question was: why was it that the Chinese Communists had to wage such a protracted civil war?

His answer was: the Chinese Communists had often failed to move under working-class leadership and strike unity between working class and the broad masses. Ranadive called Mao's theory of democratic revolution reactionary and against the core tenets of Marxism-Leninism, and that Mao's thought could have no role in the (non-existent, as Khan pointed out time and again) programme of CPI leadership. Ordinary partisans did not fail to notice that the call for socialist revolution was theoretically untenable and never seriously implemented on in real urban situations (where electoral alliance with intermediary classes was promoted). It was a purely proscriptive move. Khan reminded that on 15<sup>th</sup> November, 1969, in Calcutta at a public meeting of the CPI (Marxist), the party's Secretary Sundarayya said, alluding to the Communist party of China: 'We shall conduct our own revolution. We need not listen to any other Communist Party.' Khan located the long crypto-nationalist shadow of Ranadive in this wager.

This continuity was brought out by Khan for some concrete reasons. He posited the "Andhra Letter" as a historic document that created a fault line that would predict and pattern the history of Communism in his area as a rational sequence of internal contradictions, antagonisms, division, renaissance and resurrections.

The Telangana Revolution deeply influenced the Communists in the adjacent Andhra areas. They considered Telangana as the vanguard of anti-feudal people's democratic revolution, and wanted the Party to support it. By the first half of 1948, the theoretical and practical engagement between the Telangana and Andhra Communists was dynamic. From close proximity, the Andhra Committee started ascertaining the theoretical underpinning of Telangana line. The resultant ferment was enshrined in the "Andhra Letter", which began circulating within the Party from June 1948.

This document proclaimed Mao Tse-tung's new democracy as the path of revolution. Khan summarised the document thus: In the territory of the Indian state the primary contradiction was between the big monopoly bourgeoisie and feudal landlords on one side and the people and peasants on the other. Small entrepreneurs, regional small bourgeoisie were exempted from the full statist implication of capital at this stage, a stage in which the peasantry and broad sections of the people led by the working class struggles against monopoly capitalism and feudalism in an armed and protracted guerrilla war, which would be the primary form of struggle. It also stated that the revolution in Russia and the impending one in the territory of the Indian state could not be identical. General strikes and urban insurrection could not feasibly cleanse the rural areas from feudal ethos and private property; an agrarian revolution would accomplish this task through intense resistance and protracted civil war. Through people's war a democratic dictatorship led by the working class would assume political power.

These Communist partisans were acutely aware of the perils of an overt dependence on middle and rich peasants (which plagued the two Communist parties consistently), as Khan emphasised: "The most important feature of Telangana Revolution was that it patterned a broad peasant unity initially. But more the struggle approached decisive encounters, the leadership of the agricultural workers, poor peasants and landless tillers was consolidated – as the other middle to rich peasants either became neutral or hostile." This was the most important innovation of Telangana Revolution. This revolution was certainly not a populism permitted by middle and rich peasants or any sub-regional elite or gentry. Ranadive's position was formed in antagonism to the "Andhra Letter", as were the later positions of both CPI and CPI (M). This antagonism was interpreted by Khan as contrary to the internationalism that marked Communism; the leadership fell into the 'garbage of bourgeois nationalism' by claiming a special or authentic path for 'India'.

The call for agrarian revolution or peasant guerrilla war had nothing to do with exclusive national specification, it was seen and consistently proposed as the internationalist, universal Communist idea by its militants, while those calling for 'socialist' revolution and 'peaceful transition to socialism' increasingly posited faith on bourgeois nationalist ploys of statist economic policy: "As revolution advances, reactionary forces unite too, and deploy new counter-revolutionary strategies." The bourgeoisie and the landlords devised a plan to deflect the struggle from its revolutionary path. They appointed Vinoba Bhave, one of the chief disciples of Gandhi – 'the arch-enemy of peasants and workers of India'. Bhave started the *Bhoodan* Movement. Immediately after the Communist central leadership backstabbed Telangana in 1951, he initiated *Bhoodan* in Hyderabad. This was a 'hilarious movement, albeit a satanic frivolity'. It was designed to stop the landless agricultural labourers from participating in revolutionary struggle. Bhave's core principle was that feudal structure and landlordism should remain, only the landlords should donate a small part of their holdings for distribution among the landless agricultural labourers – the latter would thus refrain from political struggle and anti-landlordism. Bhave wanted to convince the peasants that the agrarian question could be solved through Gandhi's methods of non-violence; landlordism could co-exist with the peasants. Significantly, this scheme was applied first in Hyderabad, where 'Telangana shook the foundation of feudalism'. More important was the fact that leaders of the Communist Party welcomed *Bhoodan*, and used it as a justification for participating in parliamentary elections and suspending the Telangana insurrection.

#### REFERENCES:

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- II. Ibid, P-55.
- III. Ibid, P-12.
- IV. Ibid, P-23.
- V. Ibid, P-24.
- VI. Ibid, P-40-41.
- VII. The documents from late 1948 and early 1949 that phrased these concerns (Bibliography I.C.24,25 in Agnibho Gangopadhyay, Biography of a Pseudonym: Suprakash Ray, Bengal, 1915-1990, A Dissertation Submitted to the Faculty of History, University of Oxford In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy, September 2018) estimated that the Chinese revolution led by the Communist party was failing and will fail. The estimate failed.
- VIII. Ranadive and his leadership accepted in 1950 that this stand was completely erroneous and untenable – not before such 'errors' weakened Telangana Revolution and its proliferation in other regions; see Bibliography I.C.29 in Agnibho Gangopadhyay, Biography of a Pseudonym: Suprakash Ray, Bengal,

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- IX. See Bibliography I.B.28, in Agnibho Gangopadhyay, Biography of a Pseudonym: Suprakash Ray, Bengal, 1915-1990, A Dissertation Submitted to the Faculty of History, University of Oxford In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy, September 2018; P-39-44.
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